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SITUATIONAL VOCABULARY.

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IT IS GENERALLY ADMITTED THAT THE VOCABULARY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS MORE EASILY LEARNED IF IT IS ORGANIZED IN COHERENT SEMANTIC GROUPS AROUND "SITUATIONS" OR "CENTERS OF INTEREST." WHAT IS NEEDED IS A LOGICAL AND NON-ARBITRARY TAXONOMY OF SITUATIONS. WE DISTINGUISH, FIRST, OPEN AND CLOSED SITUATIONS. CLOSED SITUATIONS (FOR EXAMPLE, DAYS OF THE WEEK) REPRESENT AN ANALYSIS OF REALITY THAT BEARS DEFINITE FEATURES RECOGNIZABLE BY ALL THE USERS OF A LANGUAGE. IN CONTRAST, AN OPEN SITUATION (FOR EXAMPLE, THE HOUSE) IS VIRTUALLY UNLIMITED, LACKS PRE-ESTABLISHED ORGANIZATION, AND VARIES FROM INDIVIDUAL TO INDIVIDUAL. WITHIN CLOSED SITUATIONS ONE DETECTS A FURTHER DICHOTOMY BETWEEN POSITIONED AND UNPOSITIONED FRAMES. THE MONTHS OF THE YEAR CONSTITUTE A SITUATION WITH A POSITIONED FRAME, SO THAT BY NAMING 1 MONTH WE KNOW EXACTLY WHAT MONTH FOLLOWS IT. COLORS OFFER AN UNPOSITIONED FRAME, AS THEY ARE GENERALLY USED APART FROM ANY SET ORDER. IN PREPARING VOCABULARY FOR SITUATIONAL TEACHING, IT IS PROPER NOT ONLY TO ORGANIZE SUBJECTIVE "OPEN" SITUATIONS ACCORDING TO AGE AND INTEREST, BUT ALSO TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE FACT OF CLOSED SITUATIONS IN THE EARLY STAGES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING," VOLUME 4, NUMBER 3, SEPTEMBER 1966. (AUTHOR)

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SITUATIONAL VOCABULARY

R. M. Jones

Il est généralement admis que le vocabulaire d'une langue étrangère s'apprend mieux s'il est organisé en groupes sémantiques cohérents autour de "situations" ou "centres d'intérêt". Ce qu'il faut pour cela, c'est une taxonomie logique, non-arbitraire, des situations.

On distingue d'abord les situations (classes) ouvertes et fermées. Le contenu des situations fermées (e. g. les jours de la semaine) représente une analyse particulière de la réalité et se présente comme un ensemble de données pré-établi, commune à tous les usagers d'une langue. Par contre, une situation ouverte (les termes à associer au concept "la maison", par exemple) est virtuellement sans limite, sans organisation pré-établie, et variable d'individu en individu.

On constate, à l'intérieur des situations fermées, une deuxième dichotomie, entre celles à rang fixe et celles à rang indéterminé. Les mois de l'année constituent une situation fermée à rang fixe: à l'énoncé d'un seul mois on sait exactement quel mois doit suivre. Les couleurs simples ont un rang indéterminé: on peut les énumérer complètement sans qu'il y ait un ordre déterminé pour le faire. En associant diverses situations que l'on structure de manière analogue, on peut transformer une situation fermée à rang indéterminé en une à rang fixe.

On définit la différence entre une situation fermée et ouverte comme suit: dans une situation fermée le mot de tête sous lequel sont classés les autres constitue la partie générique de la définition de ces mots; dans une situation ouverte, les mots sont groupés par association sous un mot clé mais ne sont pas définis par ce dernier.

Avant de grouper des mots pour les enseigner en situations, il faut analyser la disponibilité des situations elles-mêmes à des élèves d'âge et d'intérêt différents. Il est probable que l'ordre de présentation du vocabulaire qui soit le plus favorable pédagogiquement serait celui où l'on commence par des mots en situations fermées à rang fixe, passe par des mots en situations fermées à rang indéterminé pour aboutir à des mots en situations ouvertes.

Es wird allgemein angenommen, daß der Wortschatz einer Fremdsprache besser gelernt wird, wenn er in zusammenhängende semantische Gruppen geordnet und um „Situationen" und „Interessenzentren" gegliedert ist. Dazu ist eine logische, nicht willkürliche, Taxonomie der Situationen nötig. Man unterscheidet zunächst offene und geschlossene Situationen (Klassen). Die geschlossenen Situationen (z. B. die Wochentage) beinhalten eine bestimmte Analyse der Realität und bieten sich dar als ein Ganzes vorbestimmter Gegebenheiten, welches allen Sprechern dieser Sprache gemeinsam ist. Im Gegensatz dazu ist eine offene Situation (z. B. Ausdrücke, die man um den Begriff „das Haus" gruppieren kann) ohne Begrenzung, nicht vorausbestimmte, von Mensch zu Mensch variabel.

Innerhalb geschlossener Situationen wird eine weitere Zweiteilung festgestellt und zwar zwischen solchen mit bestimmter und unbestimmter Ordnung. Die Monate eines Jahres bilden eine Situation mit bestimmter Ordnung: wird ein

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Monat bezeichnet, weiß man genau, welcher der darauf folgende ist. Farben sind unbestimmter Ordnung: man kann sie alle aufzählen, ohne daß es dafür eine vorbestimmte Reihenfolge gäbe. Reiht man verschiedene, analog strukturierte Situationen aneinander, so kann man eine geschlossene Situation von unbestimmter in eine mit bestimmter Ordnung umformen.

Die Unterschiede zwischen geschlossenen und offenen Situationen werden folgendermaßen definiert: in einer geschlossenen Situation bildet das Hauptwort, unter welches die übrigen Wörter gruppiert werden, den generischen Teil der Definition dieser Wörter. In der offenen Situation werden die Wörter durch Association unter ein Schlüsselwort gruppiert, sind durch dieses aber nicht definiert.

Bevor man Wörter zusammengibt, um sie mit Hilfe von Situationen zu lehren, sollte man deren Brauchbarkeit bei Schülern verschiedenen Alters und Interesses untersuchen. Wahrscheinlich ist die pädagogisch günstigste Reihenfolge der Darbietung des Vokabulars so, daß man mit Wörtern in geschlossenen Situationen mit bestimmter Ordnung beginnt, übergeht zu Wörtern in geschlossenen Situationen mit unbestimmter Ordnung, bis man schließlich zu Wörtern in offenen Situationen kommt.

The importance of presenting the vocabulary of a new language situationally is generally recognised. As a result, language teachers classify vocabulary into internally cohesive semantic groups: it seems, for instance, logical to introduce 'cow' in the same context as 'field' rather than in the same context as 'air-liner.' Words group themselves according to the subject being discussed, and the usefulness or relevance of that particular subject to the language learner is an essential consideration in the selection and grading of vocabulary.

In speech, sentences are not detached notionally, but group themselves thematically. To be sure, language teachers are not obliged to follow this same procedure, since their task of teaching a second language is in any case more artificial than the acquisition of a first language; nonetheless, organising language materials in semantic groups holds the attention and interest of children more readily than unrelated content.

Recently the idea of disponibility (availaibility) of vocabulary has had important repercussions in the preparation of language materials, originally in France, then in Quebec, Ireland, Wales and elsewhere. In research on this topic, two steps have to be taken before one starts totting up the statistical results of "opinion-polls" or before breaking up "centres of interest" into parts. We must have some fairly clear definition of "situation" or "centre of interest" that can be applied rigorously; and the listing of such centres of interest to be investigated must be arrived at objectively – we cannot just assemble any particular number of "centres of interest" that strike us subjectively as being useful.

Open and closed situations

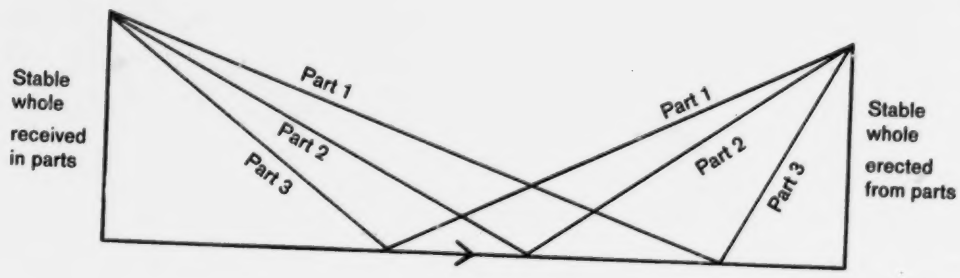
In this paper, we limit our attention to a definition and classification of situations or centres of interest from a practical didactic point of view. The name of a linguistic situation might tentatively be described as the name of the whole (or the general principle) uniting the parts (or individual words) into a related semantic group. In all languages we are faced with two broad types of situations – open and closed ones. A closed situation can be limited and clearly defined – 'days of the week,' for instance – whereas an open situation, such as 'the house', can open out into an infinite number of parts or aspects.

The contents of the closed situations are common to all users of the language, and are universally produced in the same way: there is no choice. Open situations on the other hand may be, and almost inevitably are, variable: lists around such centres of interest vary from individual to individual.

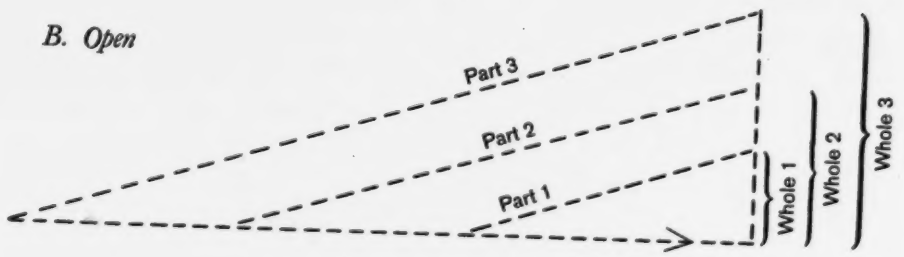
The closed situation is already constructed: it is built into the language. It is a particular analysis of reality that has taken its place as a part of the framework of language. A child, in learning his first language, discovers this reality as a general, pre-established principle: he must understand the general principle (or situation) before he properly understands the parts. But the open situation is ever-changing: it is a general impression, which the child has to build anew for himself.

As a result, the process of building the one situation and the other must be different. With the one situation the child is constructing a set, pre-determined framework from parts of a whole he is receiving, whereas with the other, the whole he is building changes in nature to some degree, however slight, with every new part he adds.

A. Closed



B. Open



In a closed situation no part exceeds the limits of the 'first' whole erected: in an open situation every additional part is external to the 'first' whole. In A, every additional part strengthens the whole: the primary process of analysing this whole into parts is reflected in the secondary process of synthesising them into a new whole. The distance between the one whole and the other is inalterable, for this is the defining framework of the situation. With B, however, we always remain in the realm of the particular, and the situation itself never acquires a strict division of internals. In A the whole conditions, in B the parts condition; or in other words, in A the language structure or habits themselves condition or define, irrespective of the occasional environment, whereas in B the varying circumstances, to a much greater extent, are the determining factor. The internal form of A is the conditioner; in B the externals of time and place are the conditioner. This dichotomy bears some resemblance to that of *langue* and *parole* made by Saussure, or more strictly to that of *langue* and *discours* made by Guillaume.

Closed situation = H C F (Highest Common Factor)
or L C M (Lowest Common Multiple)
Open situation = Σ (a, b, c ... n)

Closed Positioned and Closed Unpositioned

Before returning to review the relationship between these two broad types of situation, let us examine in more detail the more intersting of them, namely the *closed situation.* It immediately appears that we have two types of closed situation – that with a positioned structure, and that with an unpositioned one. Both these types are defined by the general situation; but in the one the position of every element or word in the situation is predetermined, whereas in the other, although the limits of the situation are firmly defined, the elements or words forming it may stand in any positional relationship to one other that circumstances may demand. For example, in a list of words, such as:

January, February, ————, April, May
One, two, three, ———— , five.

we know exactly what the missing word is. But in the following list:

red, green, orange, brown, ———, pink

we know that the possibilities that fill the space are limited and are within a certain field, but the *order* of the elements in that field is immaterial.

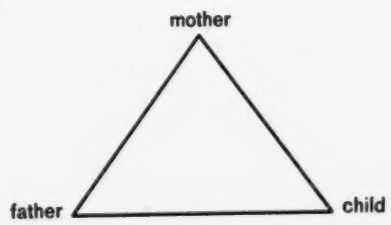
Take another example: we may build a positioned situation in this way –

father	mother	child
ram	sheep	——
——	aunt	cousin
bull	——	calf

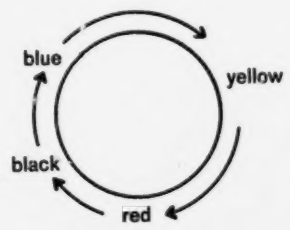
In all these, we are able to fill in the blanks. But these words can also be used in an unpositioned closed situation: e. g. kangaroo, monkey, *sheep*, elephant, zebra, dog. We would have no trouble in locating *sheep* if we were faced with placing it in a list of vegetables, animals, or minerals; but its particular position within that field is changeable. In both cases the constellation of elements or words is organised into a situation by the general principle of the whole; but in the positioned situation, there is also a form in the whole that obliges us to think of it in a particular way.

It is as if we were dealing with straight lines and curved surfaces:

(a) positioned situation



(b) unpositioned



M. M. Lewis and Piaget see the child, in learning his first language, classifying things in "groups, in accordance with one quality or another – for instance, size, colour or shape" as well as in "series – for instance according to size or weight." This distinction between "groups" and "series" is similar to the one we make between "unpositioned" and "positioned".

There are two methods of structuring an unpositioned closed situation:

HCF: wood – desk, ruler, partition, box, boat
LCM: colour – yellow, red, black.

With LCM we are obliged to make a generalisation that holds the complete contents of every element every time: with HCF we merely have to generalise a single aspect that is within or amidst the contents of every element, not merely associated with the subject thought of. Usually three elements of LCM will be sufficient to identify the situation involved; but it is quite likely that more will be needed to identify the HCF. Wood does not define boat (although it is a common factor or element entering into it here); but colour defines yellow.

There are various methods of structuring a positioned situation; but is seems that there need only be three elements entering into it every time, viz, first word, second word, and principle of relationship or analogy:

e. g. (i) listing: consecutiveness of number, time, or place:
first, second, ——, fourth

(ii) antonyms: –
going, coming; to, ——; big, ——; old, ——.

This particular relationship has been still further built into languages by the use of prefixes and suffixes.

(iii) prefixes or suffixes:

These may be used for a variety of reasons, but they often express a general principle, such as *abstraction:* –

red, redness; homesick, ——; happy, ——.

(iv) conventional relationship:

bull, cow;	——, sow;
man, ——;	dog, ——;

(v) grammatical structure:

If we allow that the *positioned structure* is a valid description of something that actually exists in the classification of situational vocabulary, we may (for the sake of exhaustiveness) include within its scope the organisations imposed by grammatical analysis:

big, bigger, biggest
good, ——, best,
bad, worse, ——.

It is, of course, debatable whether morphological categories – such as the past tense of verbs for instance – should be counted as situations; but if they express, as here, a mental tie or a grouping that has some semantic link within it, then we seem justified in applying our definition of "situation" to such 'borderline' cases.

Each of these positioned structures possesses a simple stable framework, and the number and typology of such structures must be limited.

Now, when we examine the unpositioned closed situations, we find that we are dealing with wholes indisputably built up of definite elements, but elements with no fixed relationship to each other apart from their belonging to the whole: e. g.

clothes	*animals*	*colours*	*buildings*	*parts of the body*	*trees*
frock	monkey	red	mansion	arm	oak
trousers	tiger	blue	factory	heart	ash
vest	camel	green	bungalow	head	elm
socks	pig	yellow	palace	ear	sycamore
etc., . . .	etc., . . .	etc., . . .	etc., . . .	etc., . . .	etc., . . .

The classifying word at the head of each of these columns is the definition of the words included under it. Such a procedure – ensuring that the name of the situation holds good for all the parts included under it – is the key to the closed situation generally. The head word encircles semantically the inner contents that belong to such and such a situation in virtue of the fact that they are defined by it. The word *animal* can also belong to an open situation including the words *pasture, farm, cowshed, market*, etc.; but these are external and undefined by the headword. They may be included by the situation but they are not defined by it: rather, they are 'associated' with it.

Association of ideas is a very real thing in vocabulary classification but the method of measuring it and constructing vocabulary for an open situation is entirely different from the more objective and rigorous determination of the members of a closed situation. Association of ideas may differ between teacher and pupil, and pupil and pupil; the closed type is stable and common to all.

The open situation – often a complex group of stimuli – is admittedly what is usually thought of by the word 'situation': it involves what Nelson Brooks terms "the who, where, when, what and how of language in action." It need not, of course, be material. Brooks goes on to say: "Belief and behaviour tend to display clearly discernible designs or patterns that cluster around certain focal points of thought and activity, which may be referred to for want of a better name as *situations*."

Summary

At this point, we may summarise one aspect of our conclusions with one set example: *Monday*

Open	Closed		
	positioned	unpositioned	
		H. C. F. (time)	L. C. M. (day)
Monday	Sunday	two o'clock	tomorrow
washing	Monday	April	anniversary
comic	Tuesday	late	Monday
music lesson	Wednesday	half an hour	weekday
school	Thursday	tomorrow	red-letter-day
Miss Jenkins	Friday	sometimes	bank holiday
playing football	Saturday	Monday	Good Friday

Whenever a positioned piece of vocabulary is introduced in language teaching, it seems inevitable that it should be learnt in position; but our aim is eventually to free it from this set frame (perhaps by way of the unpositioned frame) to enter

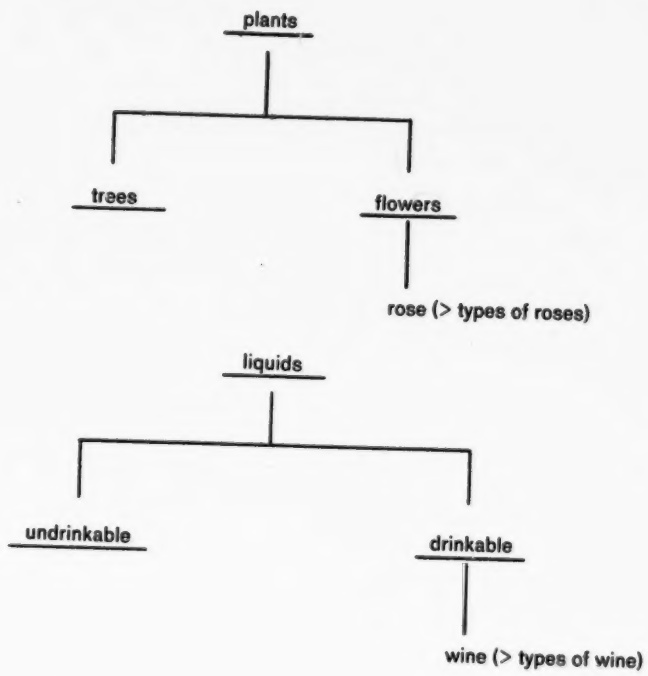
an open situation where it can be manipulated flexibly, unhampered by the mechanics of the frame in which it found its basic definition.

Most positioned situations will have to be included early in a language course: it would seem well to keep the unpositioned closed situations in mind (particularly L. C. M.) for early introduction too, without losing sight of the fact that the ultimate aim is the development of open situations.

These conclusions lead us to examine the centres of interest listed by CREDIF in a new light. We see that there is a distinct difference between a centre of interest such as *house furniture* and one such as *house*, or between *food and drink* and *the town*. In analysing vocabulary situationally, it would seem well to be conscious of the distinction in form between situation like *parts of the body* and one like *religion*; and indeed, in an experiment to formulate the word members of the one and the other, it would be advisable to investigate their usefulness or availability in different ways: perhaps even the presentation itself and the organisation of teaching units would be different because the one situation is structured in a severer or more compact manner.

In classifying vocabulary by situation we should organize closed unpositioned structures in "Aristotelian" hierarchies:

e. g.



In each of these schemata the general principles, or situations, have been underlined; but for a detailed analysis of vocabulary, the nearest general principle (e. g. flowers, drinkable liquids), to the word presented (e. g. rose, wine) is naturally the first point for organisation.

There are obviously insignificant as well as significant class-words. "Animal" is a class-word defining wild-animals (lion, monkey, elephant, etc.), tame food-producing animals (cow, sheep, pig, etc.) as well as tame non-food producing animals (dog, cat, etc.); but *dog*, in itself, is a class-word too, and defines terrier, poodle, bulldog, corgi (Cardiganshire and Pembrokeshire), and so on. When once a hierarchy of class-words has been organised, therefore, the *frequency* of the words falling under the one class-word and the other may be a determining factor in selecting the groups that are to be useful; for instance, if the frequency of elephant, cow, dog, etc. is higher than that of Indian elephant, Frisian, and Alsatian, then *animal* is a more useful class-word than either *elephant, cow* or *dog*.

CREDIF and other research groups are in quest of useful categories to be adopted in presenting vocabulary in language courses. The obvious first step should be to list those *general class words*, such as 'clothes', that are to be found in an ordinary dictionary. These should then be hierarchised as far as possible. Then research should be carried out on what classes of vocabulary or what centres of interest are suitable or 'available' (*disponsible*) for the various age-levels, bearing in mind the environmental characteristics of the various places where the language is to be presented. In other words, we should calculate the availability of these class-words themselves before seeking information on the most "available" words that fall under them. Words could be introduced in courses, as far as possible, in bound classified groups. In our situational analysis of vocabulary, it is our argument that it is advantageous to specify *a definition* of "situation" and to analyse the various general types of situation before going on to find the individual words that are members of these types, i. e. the words which it will be advisable to present eventually in a language course. Lack of criteria or the presence of a variety of different criteria (even within a single classification of vocabulary) has in the past invalidated results and led to a confusion of materials.

There are, necessarily, many words, such as 'go' and 'man', that are not easily classified situationally. But it would seem that where it is possible to classify in bound situations (and the number of these is limited), the opportunity should be seized as early as possible to group vocabulary in this way, since one word aids another in the memory whenever it is rationally and basically associated, although of course the learner must attain the more stimulating open situations sooner or later. In the grading of vocabulary situationally, it may be found useful to take a broad though not rigid development from closed (positional) through closed (unpositional) on to open situational words.

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